

Douglas Stover

# The Sewall-Belmont House

## National Historic Site

### The Florence Bayard Hilles Library

#### Opens to the Public

**B**uilt by Robert Sewall in 1799-1800, the Sewall-Belmont House is one of the oldest houses on Capitol Hill.

Rented to Secretary of the Treasury Albert Gallatin from 1802-1813, the house was a witness to the only resistance to the British invasion of Washington, DC, during the War of 1812. On August 24, 1814, American flotilla men who had occupied the house fired shots at the British. In retaliation, the British burned the house. Rebuilt by Robert Sewall in 1820, the house was owned by his descendants until 1922. The National Woman's Party bought the house for its headquarters in 1929. Named for the original owner and Alva Belmont, a benefactress of the women's movement, the Sewall-Belmont House was designated a National Historic Site by Congress in 1974. Today, by cooperative agreement, the house serves as a National Park Service site.

*The Florence Bayard Hilles Library, Sewall-Belmont House NHS, Washington, DC.*



Once the property was in National Woman's Party hands, a committee was formed in 1940 to convert the old carriage house of the Alva Belmont House. The group desired a library to accommodate the Alva Belmont Book Collection, which had been in storage since 1933. The chairman of this committee was Florence Bayard Hilles, an ardent feminist and former president of the National Woman's Party. The committee hired a young female architect, Elise Dupont, to help with the carriage house conversion. By October 1941, the committee had completed the physical conversion of the library, and with the help of volunteer librarian, Mary Elizabeth Downey, the Alva Belmont Book Collection was installed. The new library was dedicated on November 12, 1941, as the Alva Belmont Feminist Library. Ms. Downey was named its first librarian. This library was pronounced as the first feminist library in the United States.

Ms. Downey actively promoted the new library with calls for books, biographies, articles, scrapbooks, and other related materials. **She wanted to build the library into a place where women could learn about religion, science, medicine, politics, and the history of the daring women who ventured into these fields.** She also believed that in order to further the educational aspect of this library outreach programming would be essential. Within the first month of the dedication she began an ambitious educational program with teas, lectures, and book discussions. Downey also strongly encouraged National Woman's Party members to promote feminist literature in their local libraries by requesting purchases of books related to women's history or novels by or about women. Downey was instrumental in promoting growth of feminist literature in university libraries.

The Alva Belmont Feminist Library grew rapidly, requiring more shelving for books. A new volunteer librarian, Alice Matthews, came on board. By 1943, the library was a major source of pride for the National Woman's Party. A decision was made to name the library after the woman who chaired the committee, Florence Bayard Hilles. The newly named library was re-dedicated

on December 12, 1943. Prominent members of the library community, such as George F. Bowerman and Clara W. Herbert of the Public Library of the District of Columbia and Dr. Archibald MacLeish, Librarian of Congress, spoke at the dedication. In response to Alice Paul's dedication announcement Florence Bayard Hilles stated that:

It was Thomas Carlyle who said 'The true university of these days is a collection of books'. So the old Coach House has become a library and a university as well.... In expressing my appreciation and gratitude I find it difficult, so I shall content myself by simply saying, 'Thank you, thank you'.

The Florence Bayard Hilles Feminist Library remained an important force within the National Woman's Party until the early 1960s. With a collection of nearly 3,000 books on woman's history between 1900s-1960s, the library is a substantial resource. The collection boasts over 1,000 historic photographs of the National Woman's Party, Alice Paul, and woman's suffrage. Other special collections materials include diaries, letters, manuscripts, cartoons drawings, and a room full of gold and purple banners that once were used to carry the message of women's rights and suffrage to the White House.

By the mid-1970s, the library was all but forgotten. Today, the National Park Service and the National Woman's Party are restoring the Florence Bayard Hilles Feminist Library, both as a building and as an archival collection. The library's women's history collections are being preserved and cataloged in order to make them accessible to researchers interested in women's history. On September 17th, 1998, the library was re-dedicated and re-opened to the public in a gala ribbon cutting ceremony attended by members of Congress, the White House, and the public. After 25 years of neglect, a national treasure trove will be restored to its former glory and re-dedicated to serving the cause of women's history.

The library is now open to the public to serve scholars and researchers of women's history. You can visit the Sewall-Belmont House National Historic Site and library at 144 Constitution Avenue, N.E., Washington, DC by calling 202-546-3989 or via the World Wide Web at <<http://www.natwomanparty.org>>.

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Candace Lein-Hayes

## Records Management Assistance from NARA

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National Park Service personnel and other federal agencies around the country have a place to turn for assistance with records management problems or questions. The National Archives and Records Administration (NARA), Office of Regional Records Services, operates a system of regional records facilities which provide records management services to federal agencies. Each regional records facility serves a specific geographic region and provides a variety of services including low cost inactive records storage, reference service, and records disposition; records management training and technical assistance; and reimbursable micro-graphic services.

In addition, NARA regional staff are available to provide, by phone or during on-site visits, advice and guidance on records management including federal records management regulations,

application of agency records schedules, preservation of permanent records, disaster planning for agency records, and electronic records management. Most NARA regional records facilities also house a regional archives which collects, preserves, and makes available to researchers the permanent records created by regional offices of federal agencies. General information about the NARA regional records facilities is available on the NARA web pages at <<http://www/nara.gov/regional>>.

NARA regional records facilities provide low-cost inactive records center storage for federal agencies. Records no longer needed for current business in NPS offices can be retired to a regional records center in accordance with the NPS records schedule. While stored in a NARA records center, the records remain under the legal control of the NPS and access to the record is restricted to agency personnel (unless written authorization is